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ABSTRACT

Believed to have been written about the 4th century B.C., the "Ramayana" is one of the oldest epic poems in world literature. This exercise, which takes seven or eight days to complete, is intended to acquaint Westerners with the "Ramayana" in an informal format that may spark a desire to read further in the epic and to become familiar with other works of Indian literature. There are five sections to the lesson: (1) a preliminary vocabulary exercise; (2) a basic introduction to the life of Rama (the central figure in the poem); (3) five readings from the "Ramayana," written by R. K. Narayan; (4) an opportunity for students to express themselves as storytellers; and (5) suggested discussion questions. (DB)

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RAMAYANA

AN EXERCISE IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT OF DHARMA

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RAMAYANA: An Exercise In Cooperative Learing

TO THE TEACHER

India and Pakistan is the cradle of one of the oldest epic poems in world literature, the RAMAYANA. It is believed to be the first epic written in Sanskrit. Modern historians have placed the origin of the RAMAYANA at about the 4th century B.C.. Traditionally authorship is attributed to the poet Valmiki as narrated by the great sage Narada. The work is an impressive 24,000 stanzas which is divided into episodes that center around the birth and life of Rama.

During the Axial Age [600 - 400 B.C.] philosophers tried to deal with the question of good versus evil. The RAMAYANA was a response that espoused the axiom of DHARMA (duty) and that good will be victorious over evil.

The central figure in the RAMAYANA is Prince Rama. Rama is the god VISHNU, from the pantheon of Hindu gods, reincarnated to destroy RAVANA, the ten-headed demon king of Lanka. To achieve the proper grace Prince Rama is unaware of his holy identity and must develop the power and wisdom as a man to complete his mission. Test after test is placed before Rama until he achieves total perfection and becomes the ideal man, son, brother, husband, king, and warrior.

The study of the RAMAYANA is essential to Indians of all walks of life, ages, and sex. It can be a simple story of mythology for children and foreigners or a serious study of philosophical thought for adults. As a result, practically every individual in India has thorough knowledge of the RAMAYANA. Recently I was in India and witnessed the hold the RAMAYANA has on the population. A video adaptation was presented weekly on national television. Whenever possible schedules, appointments, and dinners were arranged so the family could be free to watch the enthralling stories of Prince Rama and his wife Sita.

In the United States very few people have knowledge of the story of Rama or are even aware that the RAMAYANA exists. The RAMAYANA is a rich legacy of Asia that should be read and appreciated in the West. Not many of us are going to sit down and read a volume of 24,000 stanzas, but the intent of this exercise is to acquaint Westerners with the RAMAYANA in an informal format that may spark a desire to read further and become familiar with other works of Indian literature.

This exercise is divided into five sections.

1. The unit begins with a preliminary vocabulary exercise.
2. A basic introduction to the life of Rama is included.
3. There are five READINGS from THE RAMAYANA, written by R.K. Narayan and published by Penquin Books, 1988.
4. An opportunity for the students to express themselves as storytellers is provided.
5. Finally, there are suggested questions for discussion.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this exercise students should be able to:

1. Have a broader view of world literature.
2. Have a better understanding of Hindu tradition.
3. Understand the concept of dharma.
4. Utilize synthesis to arrive at solutions.

LESSON PLAN: 7-8 DAY PROJECT

PREPARATION:

1. Make copies of the introduction and conclusion for all the students in the class.
2. Make copies of the reading exercise for each of the cooperative groups. [READING I for group A, READING II for group B, etcetera]

FIRST DAY-----

1. Do the preliminary vocabulary exercise.
2. Explain the place the RAMAYANA has in world literature. (See the section entitled "TO THE TEACHER."
3. Distribute copies of the "INTRODUCTION" to all the students in the class.

*__HOME ASSIGNMENT__: Read the INTRODUCTION.

SECOND DAY-----

1. Discus with the students the cultural influences expressed in the INTRODUCTION. [See page iiia for a guide.]
2. Divide the class into five equal groups.
3. Distribute the "READINGS" to the five separate groups. (READING I for group A, READING II for group B, etcetera.)
4. Instruct the students **NOT TO SHARE** their "READINGS" with students of the other groups.

*__HOME ASSIGNMENT:__ Read the "READINGS" and think how they would describe it in their own words.

THIRD DAY-----

1. Individually have the students rewrite their READINGS in their own words.

*__HOME ASSIGNMENT:__ Complete the written assignment.

FOURTH DAY-----

1. Divide the class into assigned groups. Have the students compare their revised versions of the story. Decide what should be included or excluded to keep the story flowing.
2. The groups should decide who will be their "storyteller."

NOTE: An extra day can be included for this portion of the assignment.

FIFTH AND SIXTH DAYS-----

1. In the proper sequence the "storytellers" present their part

of the epic.

2. If you wish, other members of the group can make clarifications AFTER the storytellers complete their episodes.

SEVENTH DAY-----

Debriefing: Have the students discuss how the story of Rama aids in the understanding of the Indian Hindu cultural tradition. Stress the concept of DHARAM as an essential segment of an Indian's life.

Example: Rama's dharma (duty) was to destroy the demon king Ravana. If he had followed a more vain avenue and actively sought the kingship of Ayodha, which to some may appear to be his dharma, he would have failed his greater mission.

All of us possess certain abilities and perform occupations in which if we explore our full potential dramatic results will be evident. In India the understanding of dharma is much easier to comprehend. The caste system aids to explain what a person's dharma should be. However, in modern India old barriers of rank and occupation are beginning to erode in the industrial centers. This erosion is going to be a challenge to the India of tomorrow.

NOTE: The READINGS are taken IN TOTO from Mr. Narayan's book THE RAMAYANA, pages 35-64. Several words will have spellings unusual to American students. The words are not misprinted but are written as they appear in Mr. Narayan's book.

DISCUSSION OF CULTURAL INFLUENCES EXPRESSED IN THE "INTRODUCTION"

1. POLYGAMY: [Paragraph 1 line 8; Paragraph 2 line 23]

   MONOGAMY: [Paragraph 14 line 8; Paragraph 16 line 22]

   NOTE: Today it is against the law to have more than one wife if you are a Hindu. Moslems may have more than one wife.

2. PARENTAL RESPECT and RESPECT OF TEACHERS: [Paragraph 4 lines 7-12; Paragraph 5 lines 13-15; Paragraph 10 lines 16-19]

3. POLYTHEISM: [Paragraph 1 line 15; Paragraph 3 lines 35-38; Paragraph 7 lines 39-42; Paragraph 11 lines 27-30]

4. HOLY MEN (sages) INFLUENCE POLITICAL LEADERS: [Paragraph 1 lines 12-16; Paragraph 2 lines 32-34; Paragraph 6 Lines 20-27; Paragraph 11 lines 23-24]

5. FIRE AS A RELIGIOUS SYMBOL: [Paragraph 1 lines 14-17; Paragraph 2 lines 29-30; Paragraph 8 lines 43-49; Paragraph 16 line 27]

6. SUPERSTITION: [Paragraph 1 lines 9-13]

7. FORTUNE TELLING: [Paragraph 7 lines 39-42; Paragraph 10 lines 12-16]

8. DHARMA: [Paragraph 4 lines 46 through the next column line 12; Paragraph 5 lines 13-17; Paragraph 7 lines 33-36; Paragraph 13 lines 38 through the next column line 2] DEALS WITH RAMA'S DHARMA.

This is only a guide to aid you in the discussion of Indian culture as it is presented in the INTRODUCTION. Much more can be inferred but the above highlights the major points.

PRELIMINARY EXERCISE

To prepare the students to be receptive to new ideas, concepts, and the methods of this activity a one day preliminary exercise with vocabulary is recommended.

1. All of the terms used in this activity are from the READINGS sections.

2. Assign the terms to eight students. Request the students to find the words in a good dictionary.

3. After finding the words have each of the students write the word on the chalkboard and explain the definition to the class. The researchers are also to create a mental image for their classmates so the terms are meaningful.

4. When all the terms have been defined encourage the class to speculate how the terms could be used in a story about India. (Be careful not to give away any of the story line of the RAMAYANA.----The creativity of each class will vary. Be alert to keep the conversation moving in a productive and positive direction.)

OBJECTIVE OF THIS SHORT EXERCISE

The students will:

1. Listen to classmates to understand an idea or concept.
2. Use skills as storytellers.
3. Deal with an unfamiliar vocabulary.
4. Achieve an understanding of the vocabulary used to describe a portion of the Indian culture.

V O C A B U L A R Y

1. INCARNATION
2. IMMOLATE
3. PYRE
4. CREMATION
5. ASCETIC
6. ABLUTION
7. AUSPICIOUS
8. DHARMA*

* This term may not be in your dictionary. The following definition is from: INDIA, A TEACHER'S GUIDE published by The Asia Society, 1985, p. 14.

"An Indian concept meaning moral duty, virtue, righteousness, social law, moral order, or the path a person should follow in accordance with his or her nature and stage of life."

GLOSSARY FOR THE RAMAYANA

GENERAL TERMS USED IN THE RAMAYANA

1. ASHRAMA: [ə•sh•rə•mə] A sanctuary, or hermitage generally in a rural area where one can meditate.

2. ASTHRAS: [ə•s•thrəs] Spiritual weapons.

3. AXIAL AGE: **The historical period between c.600 B.C. to c.300 B.C. which witnessed the development of new religious thoughts in India and China.** (ie., Janism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism.)

4. BRAHMANS: [brə•mənz] Members of a priestly caste. The highest caste in India.

5. DEVI: [dā vē] A woman respected as a goddess.

6. DHARBHA: [dhər•bhə] A strong thick grass used to weave beds that are stretched on wooden frames.

7. GURU: [gü•rü] A spiritual teacher.

8. IKSHVAHU: [ik•sh•və hu] A dynasty of ancient India (c.6th century B.C.) known as the Solar Dynasty.

9. JI: [jē] A suffix added to a man's name to show honor and respect.

10. KOPA GRUBA: [ko•pə gru•bə] A special room in the palace where a queen can go to work-out her stress.

11. RAMAYANA: [rəh•məh•yəh•nəh] An Indian epic written in Sanskrit. The epic is composed of 24,000 stanzas.

12. VEDAS: [vā•dəs] Four collections of sacred Hindu writings.

13. YAJNA: [yəz•nə] A religious ceremony where certain mantras (chants) are said.

THE PEOPLE OF THE RAMAYANA

1. ASWAPATHI: [əs•wə•pə•thē] King of Kekaya and father of Kaikeyi (Bharata's grandfather).

2. BHARATA: [bhə•rə•tə] Son of King Dasharatha and Queen Kaikeyi.

3. DASHARATHA: [də•shə•rə•thə] King of Ayodha and father of Rama, Bharata, Lakshamana, and Shatrugna.

4. INDRA: [in•drə] This is a god of the ancient Aryans. Also known as Agni the sun or fire god.

5 JANAK: [jᵊnᵊk] King of Mithila and father of Sita.

6. KAIKEYI: [kī•kā•yē] Favorite wife (3rd) and queen of King Dasharatha and mother of Bharata.

7. KAUSHALYA: [kau•shᵊl•yᵊ] First wife and queen of King Dasharatha and mother of Rama.

8. KOONI: [kōō•nē] Favorite maid-servant of Queen Kaikeyi.

9. LAKSHMANA: [lᵊx•m•nᵊ] Son of King Dasharatha and Queen Sumithra. Twin brother of Shatrughna.

10. NARADA: [nᵊ•ra •dᵊ] A sage of ancient India who is said to have told the story of the RAMAYANA to the Poet Valmiki.

11. RAMA: [rᵊ•mᵊ] Hero of the RAMAYANA and favorite son of Dasharatha. Mother is Kaushalya. Rama is married to Sita. Rama is an incarnation the god Vishnu.

12. SHATRUGHNA: [shᵊt•rugh•nᵊ] Son of King Dasharatha and Queen Sumithra. Twin brother of Lakshmana.

13. SHIVA: [she•vᵊ] The god of creation and destruction. One of the three major Hindu gods.

14. SITA: [se•tᵊ] Wife of Rama. Incarnation of Lakshmi, wife of god Vishnu.

15. SUMANTHRA: [su•men•thrᵊ] Chief advisor to King Dasharatha.

16. SUMITHRA: [su•mē•thrᵊ] Second wife and queen of King Dasharatha. Mother of Lakshamana and Shatrughna.

17

17. TATAKA: [tᵊ•tᵊ•kᵊ] A fierce giant she-demon.

18. VALMIKI: [vᵊl•mē•kē] Ancient poet attributed with composing the RAMAYANA in Sanskrit language.

19. VASISHTHA: [vᵊ•sē•sh•thᵊ] The holy man and guru to King Dasharatha and his family.

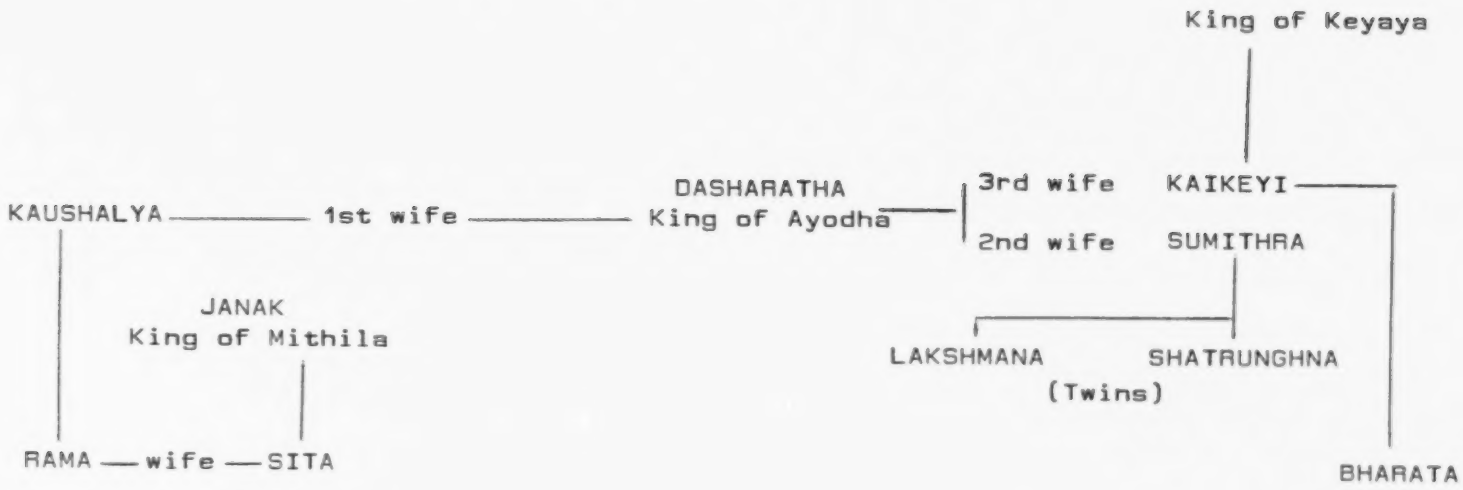
20. VISHWAMITRA: [vish•wᵊ•me•trᵊ] Holy man; sage who was highly respected and honored in the story of the RAMAYANA.

PLACES IN THE RAMAYANA

1. AYODHA: [ᵊ•yo•dhᵊ] The capital city of the Kingdom of Kaushal. Home of Rama.

2. CHITRAKUTA: [chit•rᵊ•ku•tᵊ] The first permanent campsite of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana in exile.

3. MITHILA: [mē•thē•lᵊ] Kingdom of King Janak, located near the Kingdom of Kaushal.



OTHER IMPORTANT PEOPLE

VASISHSTHA
Religious teacher
to Dasharatha

VISHWAMITRA
Ascetic - Holy man

TATAKA
She-demon

RAVANA
Ten-headed demon
King of Lanka

KOONI
Servant of Queen
Kaikeyi

SUMANTHRA
Chief Minister to
King Dasharatha

In northern India lay the kingdom of Kaushal. Along the river Sarayu stood the capital city Ayodha. Prosperity and tranquility reigned throughout the kingdom and city. The king, Dasharath was known for his honesty and duty to his subjects. Although Dasharath had three wives he did not have a male heir. Concerned that he may die without leaving a heir to continue the legacy of this dynasty the king sought the advise of the family's holy man and priest. The holy man instructed Dasharth to pray to AGNI (the Fire god) and perform a particular ritual. During the ceremony the Fire god appeared and from his hands gave Dasharath a preparation of milk and rice. The king rushed to the apartments of his queens in the palace and gave each a portion of the blessed mixture to eat.

As time past the three queens gave birth to four sons. The king was happy beyond description. He ordered gifts to be distributed to the people in honor of the births. The city was excited and alive with festivities. Candles and incense burned in every room of the palace. The celebrations continued for a month after the births. BRAHMANS came from all over he country to bless the four sons.

Soon it became obvious that the son born to Queen Kaushalya was 'bliss incarnate' and was given the name Rama. He quickly became the favorite of the king, his queens, and the court. The brothers Bharata, Shatrughna, and Laxmana too were impressed with Rama's handsome countenance and cool temperment. Of the three Laxmana was closest to and most devoted to Rama.

The education of the four princes included archery and the teachings from the VEDAS to develop the ideals of their rank and position in society. The major points of instruction stressed humility, ethics, and morality. They learned that a king's responsibility is to take care of his subjects and be concerned for their welfare. Additionally he must be honest and fair with his subjects regardless of their rank. He can never neglect the poor and needy. Rama learned the lessons well and demonstrated his eagerness to serve his teachers, father, and mothers in whatever manner they should request.

Each morning Rama would begin his day by seeking the blessings of his father and mothers' After which he would perform his duties as prince.

Rama's first adventure came while he was quite young and living at the palace. Vishwamitra, a SAGE, requested of King Dasharath the aid of Rama to drive demons from his jungle ASHRAMA. Dasharath resisted and offered battle ready armies to the sage but finally relented to the insistence of the sage to allow Rama and Laxmana to accompany him to the ashrama.

As the three approached the jungle that surrounded the ashrama they were stopped by Tataka, a wicked she-demon, who threatened to kill and devour them. As she wildly rushed toward the three Rama calmly notched an arrow to his bow-string and took deliberate aim at Tataka. Before the she-demon could reach the travelers Rama's arrow struck and pierced her heart. Vishwamitra had no fear because he knew Rama was the favored of the gods and the proper choice to aid him rid his ashrama of demons.

At the ashrama Vishwamitra lit the holy fire and began to pray. But no sooner had Vishwamitra began then the demons came to desecrate the sacred fires by throwing flesh and bones in an attempt to extinguish the pure flames. Rama's first attempt was to shoot an arrow that would fly around the YAJNA altar encircling it with ever

increasing speed creating an umbrella of protection from the demons. However, the demons did not relax their intrusions but increased their numbers and continued to attack the holy fires.

Rama sensed the only way to stop the demons was to kill them. Laxmana eager to fight joined Rama and together they killed and drove off all the demons.

Shortly after wards Vishwamitra requested Rama and Laxmana to escort him to the kingdom of Mithila where he was to bless the marriage of the king's daughter, Sita. Obeying Vishwamitra's request the two brothers accompanied the great sage on the journey.

King Janak warmly welcomed Vishwamitra and his two young friends when they arrived at the king's court. King Janak soon confided in the old sage that he feared he had placed too difficult of a challenge on the man that would marry his daughter. He said, "Only the man who could lift SHIVA'S bow and notch the string could be worthy of my daughter's hand in marriage. I fear she may never marry since no man has been able to complete the task."

Vishwamitra asked if Rama could attempt the feat. Janak amused thought Rama was too much a boy but agreed to allow him a chance to string Shiva's bow.

Though Rama had the features of a boy he grasped the bow like a man and began to bend it to fasten the string to the ends. As Rama confidently bent the bow it suddenly snapped under his strength and power with a deafening noise. Everyone in the great hall was at first dumb struck by the deed they had witnessed then just as suddenly began to shout and cheer joyfully for Rama.

The marriage of Rama and Sita was quickly arranged. Messengers were sent to Ayodhya to tell King Dasharath of the good news.

Overjoyed the king ordered Bharata and Shatrughna to prepare the royal marriage party. Everything was set in motion. Chariots, horses, and elephants were decorated with bright and festive colors and designs. The procession left Ayodhya amid the cheers and shouts of all the people.

The marriage of Rama and Sita was joined by the marriages of Laxmana, Bharata, and Shatrughna to the second daughter of king Janaka and two of his nieces at the same sacred fire.

After the marriages the wedding party departed for Ayodhya. As they approached the city's gates the people rushed to greet them with flowers that were strewn in the path of Rama and Sita and the others. Inside the city the buildings were gaily decorated with beautiful flowers. The sounds of women's voices singing and bells ringing greeted their ears as the entourage moved toward the palace. The happiness the people poured out for Rama could be seen in the tears that filled their eyes.

In his busy life Dasaratha perhaps had never studied his mirror properly. He had had no occasion to scrutinize himself too long in the mirror or engage himself in any introspection. Suddenly one day he noticed the whitening hair and the wrinkles under his eyes--noticed the slight tremor of his hands, the fatigue of his legs while engaged in a game, and realized that age had come on. It was by no means inconsiderable. The original poet Valmiki mentions that Dasaratha was sixty thousand years old! In our modern reckoning we may not agree with that figure, but put it at sixty, seventy, or eighty years; whatever it was, ripeness is indicated.

In the loneliness of his chamber, Dasaratha told himself, "One must know when to cease, and not wait for death or dotage. While my faculties are intact, let me seek retirement and rest. There is no sense in continuing and repeating the same set of activities performed all these several thousand years, as it seems to me now. Enough, I have done enough. I must now find the time to stand back and watch and lay aside the burdens of office."

He arrived at a drastic decision. He summoned his aide to the door, and told him to summon Sumanthra, his chief minister, immediately. "Send round an announcement for all our officers and public men, sages and wisemen, and all our allies and kings and relations to gather at our hall of assembly. Let as many as possible arrive."

He added, while Sumanthra waited, "No need to inform, among our relatives, Aswapathi." He was the father of his third wife, Kaikeyi. Bharata, her son, was gone there to spend a few days with his grandfather. "No need to trouble Janaka either. Mithila is too far away, and he will not be able to come in time."

"Is there anyone else to be omitted?"

"No. Invite as many as you can conveniently, an all our citizens." Messengers were dispatched in all directions. The assembly hall filled up. Dasaratha ascended the steps to his seat and, after the routine ceremonials, gestured to all to resume their seats, and spoke:

I have performed my duties as King of this country long enough. Now I have an irresistible feeling that the burden must be shifted over to younger shoulders. What do you gentlemen think about it? Under the white umbrella of the royal state, apparently there has been no change--but actually the body under it is withering. I have lived and functioned long enough. If I still thought that I should continue thus endlessly, it would amount to avarice. The other day I realized that my signature on a document was hazy. My hand must have trembled without my knowing it. The time has come for me to sit back and rest--and anticipate the coming of grandchildren. If you will agree, I want to hand over the kingdom to Rama. He should be my successor, an embodiment of all perfection. He is perfect and will be a perfect ruler. He has compassion, a sense of justice, and courage, and he makes no distinctions between human beings--old or young, prince or peasant; he has the same consideration for everyone. In courage, valour, and all the qualities--none to equal him. He will be your best protector from any hostile force, be it human or subhuman or superhuman. His ASTHRAS, acquired from his master Viswamithra, have never been known to miss their mark.... I hope I shall have your support in anointing him immediately as the Emperor of Kosala."

A joyous shout rang though the assembly. Dasaratha waited for it to subside and asked, "I note **the** the

zest with which you welcome my successor. Should I take it that you do so because you have been bearing with me silently for any reason all these years, although I had thought I had dedicated my life fully to the welfare of my subjects?"

A spokesman rose and explained. "Do not mistake us, Your Majesty. It is our love for Rama that makes us to happy now. We have long looked forward to this moment. To see him ride the Royal Elephant in full paraphernalia through the streets of our capital is a vision of the future that we cherish, young and old alike, for we are lost in the splendour of Rama's personality. It is that anticipation that makes us applaud your proposal so unreservedly. It is not that we do not wish for the continuance of Your Majesty."

Dasaratha said, "I agree with you. I just wanted to know without a trace of doubt that you approve of my desire to make Rama your King. I desire that tomorrow when the PUSHYA star is in combination with the moon, and the time is auspicious, Rama be crowned."

He summoned his minister and the priest. "Let everything, every little detail be ready for the ceremony of coronation tomorrow. Let there be widespread decorations and have all items ready at the coronation hall. Let the streets be washed, cleaned, and decorated. Let people feast and play and enjoy themselves unlimitedly. Let there be arrangements to serve a feast continuously in every corner of this capital...."

He sent for Rama. He watched his arrival from his balcony, received him warmly, took him aside, and said, "Tomorrow, you will be crowned as my successor. I need rest from work."

Rama accepted the proposal with a natural ease. Dasaratha continued. "You know everything, but still I feel it a duty to say a few words. You will have to pursue a policy of absolute justice under all circumstances. Humility and soft speech--there could be really no limit to these virtues. There can be no place in a king's heart for lust, anger, or meanness." He went on thus for some time and terminated the meeting. When Rama was back in his palace, explaining the situation to Sita, Sumanthra was once again knocking on his door.

"Your father summons you."

"Again? I have just come from him."

"He knows it, but wants you again."

When Rama presented himself, Dasaratha seated him and said, "You may be surprised at being called again. I am seized with anxiety that you should be crowned without any delay. I have premonitions which are frightening. I dream of comets, hear foul screeches from nowhere. I am told that my stars are not in a happy conjunction now. I dreamt that my star of nativity had crashed and was on fire. For one's proper birth, one owes a debt to the benediction of immortal sages, to one's ancestors, and to the gods; these three debts have to be discharged fully within the allotted span of one's life. I have no doubt that I have paid my debts fully by now. I have enjoyed my life, I have ruled as King with unquestioned authority and earned the love and confidence of my subjects. There is nothing left for me to do. I have grown old, my physical body is ready for dissolution...."

He had said these things before and was now repeating himself. Rama understood that there must be some deep agitation within him. But out of respect and graciousness, he listened to it all again as if for the first time. "My stars, Mars and Jupiter, are aspecting the same house, so say my astrologers, which means death or near death or some catastrophe. And so I want to impress on you the urgency of the matter. Tomorrow's star will be PUSHYA, and the ceremony must be

gone through, without doubts or impediments. Do not think for a moment that anything is postponable. Nothing should be put off, for we cannot say how fickle the human mind is, and what changes will occur therein.... And so what is important is that we should go through the ceremonies without hesitation. I want you to be very careful tonight, until the ceremony is over. Do not come out without your bodyguard, and observe all the austerities and vows to the last letter. Sita and yourself should have ritual baths and avoid your bed and sleep lightly on a mat of DHARBHA grass.... The ceremonies will begin at dawn. Be ready, and see that your robes are ready. You must fast tonight. Caution Sita not to delay. In a ceremonial, the wife's presence and timely participation are of the utmost importance...."

Rama listened, promising to carry out every word of his instructions faithfully. Finally Dasaratha explained, "It is best to complete all this while Bharata is away at his grandfather's place. It is good that he is away. I know his devotion to you, but the human mind, you know, can be fickle.... He may question why he should not have been the king...after all. But if he learns of it as an accomplished fact, I do not doubt that he will be extremely happy."

His father's deviousness was rather startling, but if he noticed it, Rama did not show it.

This worry at the back of Dasarath's mind about Bharata's claim turned out to be a valid one. Though Bharata was away, his cause and claim were espoused by his mother Kaikeyi so energetically that it brought on disaster and changed the whole course of events in Rama's life. It came about thus. Kooni, a freak and hunchback (and nicknamed thus on account of her deformity), was the favourite of the King's favourite wife, Kaikeyi. On this particular day she climbed to the top terrace of Kaikeyi's mansion to view the city, and notice the festoons and lights, and asked herself, "What are they celebrating today?"

When she went down, inquired, and found out the cause of the celebrations, she became excited, bit her lips, and muttered, "I will stop it." She hurried to Kaikeyi's chamber and shouted at her mistress, who was resting, "Is this the time to sleep? Wake up before you are ruined." Kaikeyi opened her eyes and cried, "You! Where have you been? What is troubling you?"

"Your impending fate," replied Kooni.

Kaikeyi was curious, but still without rising she said, "Kooni, something seems to be the matter with your health. Won't you call the physician and see that he sets you right?" She laughed and said, "Now calm down, sit near me, and sing me a song."

Kooni said sharply, "Do you know that beauty and youth are your only source of strength? And you owe your position as the queen of a world conqueror to your beauty?"

"Do I?" asked Kaikeyi, still in a playful mood.

"But beauty and youth are like a wild stream, which, while rushing down the mountainside, crushing flowers and leaves, holds you in a spell. But how long does it last? Very soon it passes, and in its place you have only the sandy bed.... It's only a question of time. When you are old and the cheeks sag, you will be a nobody, pushed aside with the back of your lover's hand. You will be at other people's mercy."

"Bring that mirror, let me see why you speak thus. Have I grown old today?" And she laughed.

"Not old, but smug, and running into danger. Doom hangs over your head."

Now Kaikeyi felt disturbed. "If you cannot talk plainly, go away; and come later. You are somehow bent upon irritating me

today." "Don't waste your beauty, which hold your husband in a spell. Before that's lost, get your husband to help you and save yourself. Get up and act before it's too late." Kaikeyi now sat up anxiously. Satisfied with the effect of her remarks, Kooni declared, "The King has cheated you. Tomorrow he is crowning Rama as the King of Ayodhya and retiring."

Kaikeyi got up, exclaiming, "Wonderful! Wonderful! Here is your reward for the good news you bear." She took off her necklace and threw it on Kooni's lap. Kooni received it and laid it aside. Now Kaikeyi said, "For the excellence of your news you deserve more. Tell me what you wish and you shall have it." This really provoked Kooni to cry out, "I said Rama is becoming the king of Ayodhya, and you behave as if I had said your son Bharata..."

I make no distinction between the two. It's all the same to me. Rama is the one who was born to it, and as a mother it makes me proud and happy...."

"You, Rama's mother!"

"Yes, don't you know that one in Rama's position should count five mothers: The one who has borne him, a stepmother, a father's sister, an elder brother's wife, and the wife of the guru--all these have equal rank as mother. You understand why I feel happy about Rama? I adore him. I'm his mother as well as Kausalya is. And so make no mistake that I'm a fool and do not understand things!" At which Kooni beat her brow with here palms with such force that Kaikeyi said, "You have hurt yourself--a contusion big as my thumb!"

"I'd be happy if I killed myself or had not been born at all, rather than see all the treachery that goes on in this world," wailed Kooni. "My sorrow, now, is for you, the doom that overhangs you. It rends my heart to see the carefree innocence of your heart--it reminds me of the little dove flitting at the jaws of a wildcat."

All this amount of talk prepared Kaikeyi's mind to be receptive to what Kooni said next: "Your husband, the Emperor, is very cunning; he is capable of great trickery, unsuspected by you; great depths of trickery indeed, unbeknown to you, such depths as you cannot suspect even in your wildest dream. You and he are unequals. He was old enough to be your father when he asked for your hand; and your father refused the proposal, of course. But the old bridegroom was intoxicated with the spectacle of your beauty and youth, and was prepared to promise anything. He vowed to your father that he'd make the son borne by you the heir to the throne. I was the only one who overheard it. No one else knows about it. Now when the time came, the old man advised Bharata sweetly: 'Why don't you go and spend a few days with your grandfather? He has been asking you so long.' And forthwith got him and his inseparable brother Sathrugna out of the way. He would have sent you away too--but for the fact that he can't survive even a single day without your caresses! Your charms are still potent. You will have to save yourself with their aid before it's too late.... Rama should not be enthroned tomorrow."

"Why not? The King may have his own reasons; and I see no difference between Rama and Bharata."

"Do you know how people can change overnight? Tomorrow this time, he will be a different Rama. His only aim will be to stay long and strong in his seat, and to achieve it he will remove all hurdles. The chief hurdle will be Bharata, who may assert his claim any time and win it by public support. Rama will banish him or break him down or behead him. You will no longer be a queen, but an ex-queen, of an ex-king, and will probably be reduced to the status of

being the handmaid of the queen mother Kausalya."

"Never! how would she dare!" cried Kaikeyi involuntarily. "Let her try!"

"By this time tomorrow, it could happen; it's bound to happen sooner or later." Thus Kooni had brought Kaikeyi to the brink of panic, before spelling out the remedy: "Do you remember that Dasaratha was saved by you at one time, and there are ancient Promises to be fulfilled? Leave alone his promise to your father: You are not concerned with it. But hold on to the two promises given to you. Demand first the banishment of Rama to the forests for fourteen years, and secondly the crowning of Bharata in his place immediately."

"Impossible conditions; you must be drunk."

"No, quite practical, only go about it this way...."

Thus it happened that when Dasaratha sought Kaikeyi's company, as was his wont, he did not find her in here chamber or the garden. A maid told him, "She is in the KOPA GRUBA."

"Why, why there?" He had a tiring day. He had had meetings again and again with his chief spiritual mentor, Vasishtha, and his chief minister, Sumanthra, going into details of arrangements for the next day's ceremonials and festivities. "I will be the host for the whole city tomorrow," he had said; "let no one feel any want." Again and again he had mentioned how every home and street and building should be decorated and brightened; and how musicians, dancers, and entertainers should be ready at the assembly hall before dawn, and how the state elephant and horses and chariots should move in the procession of the newly crowned king; and named the street through which the procession should pass. "People would love to see Rama on the throne and watch him in a procession. Every man, woman, and child must have a chance to look at him. Tell those conducting the procession to move slowly but not so slowly as to tire Rama...." He had gone into every detail of the ceremonies. Exhausted, in the evening, he sought Kaikeyi's company for relaxation.

He did not like the idea of being received by Kaikeyi in the KOPA GRUHA; and when he went in, he found her sprawling on the floor in semidarkness, hair dishevelled, the flowers she had been wearing torn off, here jewellery scattered, clad in indifferent clothes, and not noticing his arrival. He stooped down to ask softly, "Are you unwell?" She gave no answer to his question till he repeated it, and then answered dully, "Oh, in perfect health, in every way. No physical sickness of any kind."

"I am sorry. I was delayed. I waited because I wanted to bring you the news personally. I knew it would make you happy indeed, and wanted to have the pleasure of watching your joy."

Kaikeyi condescended to mutter, "I knew it, I am not so stupid or deaf or blind as not to know what is going on."

In that darkness and in the manner she had turned her face down, he had no means of judging the mood in which she spoke. It was difficult to be bending down so low, and he pleaded, "Why don't you get up and sit on that couch, so that I may sit beside you comfortably and listen to you?"

"You may seek all the comfort you want. I need none of it. Dust and rags are my lot hereafter."

What makes you talk in this manner? Get up and share the happiness of the whole country. Let us drive around in your chariot and see the joy that has seized the people."

"I want to be dead. That's all. If you could send me a bowl of poison, that would be more welcome to me now." It was most awkward for him to crouch or sit on the floor trying to appease her. His joints ached and creaked. But she would not budge. It was no time to call up an attendant, and so he pushed a footstool beside her and lowered himself onto it. After a great deal of cajoling, she announced: "Swear to me, by all that is holy, that you will grant me what I ask for; otherwise let me die in peace."

"I have never said no to you. You shall have whatever you want."

"Will you swear by Rama?" she asked.

He evaded a direct answer, as he felt uneasy at the mention of Rama's name. "Tell me what you want," he said clearly.

"You offered me two boons long ago. You may have forgotten it, but I haven't. May I mention it now?" Now she had sat up, and it was less irksome to communicate with her. He tried to reach out and touch her, but she pushed his hand off. "On that battlefield when you went to the rescue of Indra and fainted, do you

remember who revived you?"

"Yes," he said. "How can I forget it? I have lived to see this day because I was revived, otherwise that evening any chariot wheel could have rolled over me."

"Great memory you possess. I am glad you remember that far. And do you remember also who nearly gave her life to nurse and revive you?"

"Yes."

"What did you promise her in return?"

The king remained silent a moment, then said, "I have not forgotten."

"Bear with me if I repeat some small details that might escape your recollection. Let me help you. You said, 'Ask for two boons of your choice and you shall have them.' And then what did she do?" When he failed to answer, she added, "I said I would wait to take them, and you vowed, "Whenever you like----even if it is a hundred years hence, you shall have whatever you ask for.' "

The King, who was becoming increasingly uneasy, simply said, "I see that the time has come for you to ask." There was no cheer in his tone. He was seized with dismal forebodings.

"Should I speak about it or not?"

"Get up and put on your festive clothes and jewellery so that you may shine like the resplendent star that you are. Let us go."

"Yes----in proper time----after you have fulfilled your promise to me." He had completely lost all courage to let her mention them. The sound of words such as "promise," "vow," "Fulfill," "boon" shook his nerves. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. He dared not look at her; he knew that he would be overwhelmed by her charms, and when she said presently, "Leave me now. Go back to your Kausalya and feast and enjoy. Leave me to myself." It was not necessary for her to mention "bowl of poison" again. He knew she meant it, and the prospect unnerved him. He said passionately, "You know how much I love you. Please, come out of this room and this mood."

"You have promised me the granting of two boons, and you have sworn to it in the name of Rama----your darling son Rama. And now I'll speak out my mind. If you reject my demand, you will be the first of the IKSHVAHU race, proud descendents of the sun god himself, to go back on a promise for the sake of convenience." She took breath and demanded, "Banish Rama to the forest for fourteen years; and crown Bharata and celebrate his enthronement with the arrangements you have already made."

The King took time to understand the import of this. He got up to his feet muttering, "Are you out of your mind? Or joiking or testing me?" He moved away from her in search of the couch. He felt faint and blind, and groped about for a place to rest. He reclined on the couch and shut his eyes. She went on. "Send a messenger to fetch Bharata at once....He is quite far away. Give him time to come back. Tell Rama to take himself away."

"You are a demon," he whispered with his eyes still shut.

"Don't curse me, great King. I am not surprised that you find me less agreeable than Kausalya. Go on, go back to her and enjoy her company. I never asked you to come here and curse me. I retreated here just to avoid you."

The night continued in this kind of talk. Dasaratha made a last effort at compromise: "Very well, as you please. Let Bharata be crowned....But let Rama stay here. You know him. He will not hurt no one. Let Bharata be the king by all means----he is good. But please, I'll touch your feet----I don't mind prostrating before you----but let Rama stay here in his own home and not go away. How can he walk those rough forest paths and go on living in the open, unsheltered...?"

"He can, he is not the soft

infant you make him out to be. For fourteen years he must live away, wear the bark of trees, eat roots and leaves...."

"Do you want him to die...?" Ah..." The King screamed.

She merely said, "Don't create a scene. Either you keep your word or you don't, that's all."

The night spent itself in dead silence. Kaikeyi stayed where she was on the floor; the King lay on the couch. No one interrupted them. It was customary not to disturb when the King was with one of his wives. Even servants kept themselves out. For all that, it was inevitable that the King should be sought out sooner or later. There were many matters on which he had to be consulted. His chief minister was at his wit's end. "Where is the King? Where is the King?" was the constant question.

The assembly hall was growing crowded with distinguished guests and the public who thronged in to watch the coronation. Rama, clad in simple silk robes after several ritual baths and purification ceremonies ordained by the chief priest, was also ready, waiting for the ceremonial dress. A little before the dawn, the holy fire was lit in which offerings were to be placed to please the gods in heaven. The priestly groups were already chanting the sacred mantras in unison. Music from many sources filled the air. The babble of the crowd was continuous. But in the inner ring where the chief minister and other immediate executives were assembled, there was concern. "The King should have arrived by now. He must initiate the rites; he has to receive the rulers who will soon be arriving...." The chief minister, Sumanthra, got up to find out the reason for the delay. Things had to go according to a time-table in every detail so as to synchronize with the auspicious movement of the stars. And any single item delayed would throw the entire ceremony out of gear. Sumanthra left the assembly hall and went in search of the King. He hesitated for a moment at the door of the kopa gruha, but parted the curtains, opened the door, and entered. The sight before him, naturally, startled him. "Is His Majesty unwell?" asked the minister. "Ask him yourself," replied Kaikeyi.

"Are you also unwell? Has some food disagreed with you both?" asked the minister anxiously. The queen gave him no answer. The minister softly approached the couch and whispered, "They are waiting for you. Are you ready to come to the assembly?" The King stirred lightly and said, "Tell them all to go back. It's all over. I have been trapped by a demon." Kaikeyi now interposed to explain: "The King as strained himself and has become incoherent. Go and send Rama."

Rama arrived, expecting his stepmother to bless him before the ceremonies. At the sight of him Dasaratha cried out: "Rama!" and lapsed into speechlessness. His appearance and behaviour made Rama anxious. "Have I done something to upset him? Any lapse in my duties or performance?"

Kaikeyi said, "I'll speak on his behalf; he finds it difficult to say it. Your coronation will not take place today." And then she specified in unambiguous terms what she expected of him. She told all about the original vow and the circumstances that led to it. "It is your duty to help your father fulfil his promise. Otherwise he will be damning himself in this and other worlds. You owe him a duty as his son."

Rama took in the shock, absorbed it within himself, and said, "I will carry out his wishes without question. Mother, be assured that I will not shirk. I have no interest in kingship, and no attachments to such offices, and no aversion to a forest existence."

"Fourteen years," she reminded him.

"Yes, fourteen years. My only regret is that I have not been told this by my father himself. I would have felt honoured if he had commanded me directly."

"Never mind, you can still please him by your action. Now leave at once, and he will feel happy that you have acted without embarrassing him."

"I want you to assure him that I am not in the least pained by this order. I will take your word as his." He saw his father's plight and moved closer.

Kaikeyi said, "I will attend to him. Don't waste your time. You must leave without delay. That's his wish."

"Yes, yes, I'll do so. I will send a messenger to fetch Bharata without any delay."

"No, no," said Kaikeyi. "Do not concern yourself with Bharata. I'll arrange everything. You make haste to depart first." She knew

Bharata's devotion to Rama and, uncertain as to how he would react, preferred to have Rama well out of the way before Bharata should arrive. "I'll take leave of my mother, Kausalya, and leave at once," said Rama. He threw another look at his speechless father and left.

When Rama emerged from Dasaratha's palace, a crowd was waiting to follow him to the assembly hall. Looking at his face, they found no difference on it, but instead of ascending the chariot waiting for him, he set out on foot in the direction of his mother's palace. They followed him.

Rama went up to his mother, Kausalya. She was weak with her fasts and austerities undertaken for the welfare of her son. She had been expecting him to arrive in full regalia but noted the ordinary silks which he wore and asked, "Why are you not dressed yet for the coronation?"

"My father has decided to crown Bharata as the King," Rama said simply.

"Oh, no! But why?"

Rama said, "For my own good, my father has another command; it is for my progress and spiritual welfare."

"What is it? What can it be?"

"Only that for twice seven years, he wants me to go away and dwell in the forests, in the company of saints, and derive all the benefit therefrom."

Kausalya broke down and sobbed. She wrung her hands, she felt faint in the depth of her bowels, sighed, started out to say things but swallowed back her words. She said bitterly, "What a grand command from a father to a son!" She asked, "When do you have to go? What offence have you committed?"

Rama lifted his mother with his hands and said, "My father's name is renowned for the steadfastness of his words. Would you rather that he spoke false? ...I am thrice blessed, to make my brother the King, to carry out my father's command, and to live in the forests. Do not let your heart grieve."

"I cannot say, 'Disobey your father,' only let me go with you. I cannot live without you."

"Your place is beside your husband. You will have to comfort and nurse him. You must see that he is not sunk in sorrow by my exile. You cannot leave him now. Also, later, my father may want to engage himself in the performance of religious rites for his own welfare, and you will be needed at his side. After living in the forests, I will come back----after all, fourteen years could pass like as many days. If you remember, my earlier stay in the forests with Viswamithra brought me countless blessings; this could be a similar opportunity again, for me. So do not grieve."

Kausalya now realized that Rama could not be stopped. She thought, "Let me at least beg my husband's help to hold him back from this resolve...." However, when she reached the King's chamber and saw his condition, she realized the hopelessness of her mission. As he lay there stunned and silent, she understood that he must be in some dredful dilemma. Unable to bear the spectacle of an inert, lifeless husband, she uttered a loud wail. Her cries were so loud that the guests in the assembly hall were startled, and requested Sage Vasishtha to go up immediately and find out the cause. All kinds of music, chanting of hymns, prayers, laughter, and talk had filled the air; but this sudden intrusion of wailing destroyed the atmosphere of joy. Vasishtha hurried on. He found the King looking almost dead, Kaikeyi sitting apart and watching the scene unperturbed, and Kausalya in a state of complete desperation and wretchedness. He quickly tried to estimate the situation. It would be no use questioning Kausalya. He turned to the calm and firm-looking Kaikeyi. "Madam, what has happened?"

"Nothing to warrant all this hullaballoo," Kaikeyi said. "A

situation like this ought to be ignored, a purely domestic matter. Do not be perturbed, sir. Go back to the assembly and tell them to be calm. A few changes in the arrangements, that's all. They will be told about it soon."

"I want to know everything," said Vasishtha emphatically.

She hastened to say, "Of course, you are our spiritual mentor and guide and you have every right to demand an explanation." While she spoke, Vasishtha saw Kausalya writhing and squirming, and Dasaratha stirring. Dasaratha was evidently aware of what was going on in the room though unable to take part in the conversation. Lest either of them should begin to say things at cross-purposes with her, Kaikeyi said, "Your wisdom sustains us, sir. You will realize that nothing untoward has happened. Before I had even spoken fully, Rama understood and agreed. It's the others who are making all this fuss. Rama understood and agreed. It's the others who are making all this fuss. Rama has surrendered his right to the throne in favour of Bharata, and will stay away in the forest for fourteen years. It's a thing that concerns primarily himself, and he has accepted it without a word, with much grace. But these others think..." She swept her arm to indicate several hostile persons.

Vasishtha understood, but still asked, "What is the cause of this change?"

Kaikeyi, whose good manners had reached their limit, now said, "If my husband will speak, he can----otherwise please wait. Just tell those assembled that there is a change in the programme."

"That we will see later," said Vasishtha. "First we must revive the King." He stooped over the King lying on the couch, gently lifted his head, and helped him to sit up. "We need you, Your Majesty. You are our lord and captain. What is to happen if you are withdrawn like this?"

The King went on mumbling, Kaikeyi, Kaikeyi..."

Vasishtha said, "The Queen, Kaikeyi, is most considerate. She will do nothing that goes against your wishes. I am sure she will be obliging and helpful. There has been no opportunity to discuss these questions with her Majesty, our immediate concern being your welfare." Kaikeyi listened passively to this hopeful statement by Vasishtha.

Dasaratha, clutching at a straw of hope, asked, "Does she relent? If she does, Rama will be King; and as to my promise, let her ask for any other fulfillment she may think of...."

Relieved to find the King improving, Vasishtha turned to Kaikeyi and appealed to her with all the humility he could muster in his tone. "Everything is in your hands.... Please consider yourself as the benefactress of humanity. The whole world will be grateful to you for your help. Please reconsider."

Kaikeyi became emotional: "If one cannot depend on the promise of a famous king," she hissed, "life is not worth living. After all, I have done nothing more than ask for the fulfillment of his own voluntary promise, and you talk as if I had committed a crime!"

"You do not realize the evil consequences of your act, nor are you willing to listen and understand when we try to explain. Your obstinacy is inhuman," said Vasishtha. When she appeared unaffected, he went on: "The King's tongue never uttered the words of exile; you have passed this on as his own command, knowing that Rama would never question the truth of it. You have used your position as his favourite queen."

No matter how he argued and persuaded, Kaikeyi held her ground with cynical calm. "Oh, GURUJI, you too talk like these ignorant, self-centered people who find fault with me without understanding."

Finally the King burst out, "Oh, devilish one, you ordered him into exile! Is he gone? In seeking you as a mate, I sought my death. Those cherry-red lips I thought sustained me, but they have only been a source of the deadliest poison to finish me off now. This sage be my witness. You are no longer my wife, and your son shall not be entitled to cremate me when I die."

Kausalya, when she saw her husband's plight, was most moved and tried to comfort him in her own way. Concealing her own misery at the prospect of Rama's exile, she told here husband clearly, "If you do not maintain the integrity and truth of your own words, and now try to hold Rama back, the world will not accept it. Try and now try to hold Rama back, the world will not accept it. Try to lessen your attachment to Rama and calm yourself."

The King was not appeased by her advice. "The holy water from Ganga brought for ablution during the coronation will now serve me for my last drink; the holy fire raised will serve to light my funeral pyre. Rama, Rama, don't go. I take back my word to Kaikeyi.... How can I bear to see you go? I will not survive your departure. If I lived after your departure, what would be the difference between me and that monster in wife's shape----Kaikeyi?" Thus and in many other ways, Dasaratha lamented.

Vasishtha said, "Do not grieve.... I will see that your son is persuaded to stay back." Dasaratha had become so weakened in will that he clung to this hope when he saw the sage depart. Kausalya comforted the King by saying, "It is quite likely Vasishtha will come back with Rama." She tenderly lifted him, nursed him, and stroked his head and shoulder. He kept repeating, "Will Rama come? When? How terrible that Kaikeyi, whom I loved so much, should contrive my death so that she may place Bharata on the throne!" Silence for a while, but once again all his lamentations and fears would return redoubled.

"Kausalya, my dearest wife, listen. Rama will not change his aim, but definitely go away, and my life will end. You know why? It's an old story.

"Once while I was hunting in a forest, I heard the gurgling of water----the noise an elephant makes when drinking water. I shot an arrow in that direction, and at once heard a human cry in agony. I went up and found that I had shot at a young boy. He had been filling his pitcher; and water rushing into it had created the noise. The boy was dying and told me that his old parents, eyeless, were not far away. He had tended them, carrying them about on his back. They died on hearing of this tragedy, after cursing the man who had killed their son to suffer a similar fate. And so that is going to be my fate...."

When Rama's exile became known, the kings and commoners assembled at the hall broke down and wept; so did the religious heads and ascetics. Men and women wept aloud; the parrots in their cages wept, the cats in people's homes; the infants in their cradles, the cows and calves. Flowers that had just bloomed wilted away. The water birds, the elephants, the chargers that drew chariots----all broke down and lamented like Dasaratha himself, unable to bear the pang of separation from Rama. What a moment ago had been a world of festivities had become one of mourning. Crowds thronged hither and thither, stood in knots at street corners, watched the portals of the palace, speculating and commenting. "Kaikeyi----the red-lipped prostitute," they said, "We never suspected that our King was so lost in infatuation.... We thought that the red-lipped woman was our Queen, but she has shown her true nature----using her flesh to bait a senile male, who has sought his own ruin and thereby the ruin of our country. Let Kaikeyi try and rule this country with her son----there will be none left to rule over; we will all kill ourselves or move out with Rama. Ah, unfortunate earth not destined to have Rama as your overlord! What is Lakshmana doing? How will he stand this separation? What justification can there be for breaking a promise made to Rama? Strange act of justice this! The world has suddenly gone mad!"

Lakshmana, on hearing of the developments, was roused like the fire starting to consume the earth on the last day. "Food kept for the lion is sought to be fed to the street puppy----so plans that doe-eyed Kaikeyi," commented Lakshmana. He picked up his sword and bow, put on his battle dress, and aggressively roamed the streets swearing, "Rama shall be crowned, and whoever comes in the way will be annihilated. Let the whole world come, I'll destroy everyone who opposes, and pile up their carcasses sky high. I'll seize the crown and will not rest till I place it on Rama's head. This I'll achieve this very day, this very day." Seeing his fiery eyes and hearing his stentorian challenges, people withdrew from his proximity. "If all the gods in heaven, all the demons, all the good people of the earth, and bad----if the whole world oppose me, I'll not relent or yield to the desire of a mere female...."

His challenges and the rattling of his arms and the twanging of his bow-string reached the ears of Rama, who was just on his way to take leave of his stepmother Sumithra, Lakshmana's mother, and he immediately turned back and confronted Lakshmana. "What makes you wear all this battle-dress, and against whom are you uttering your challenges? And why are you so wild and angry?"

Lakshmana said, "If this is not the occasion for anger, when else is it? After having promised you your rightful place----to deny it now! I can't tolerate it. The vicious dreams of that black-hearted woman shall not be fulfilled. I'll not let my senses watch this injustice passively. I'll resist it till I perish."

"It was my mistake," said Rama. "I have only myself to blame for accepting my father's offer of the throne so readily without thinking of the consequences. Your tongue, learned in the recital of Vedas and all the truths of godly life, should not be allowed to utter whatever it likes so irresponsibly. Your charges will not stand the scrutiny of judicious and serene temperaments. You must not utter such bitter remarks about people who after all are none other than your father and mother." (Rama makes no distinction between mother and stepmother). "Calm yourself. Sometimes a river runs dry, and then it cannot be said to be the fault of the river----it's dry because the heavens are dry. So also, our father's change of mind, or the apparent hardheartedness of Kaikeyi,

who has been so loving and kind, or Bharata's chance of succession.... These are really not our own doing, but some higher powers have decreed them. Fate...."

"I'll be the fate to overpower fate itself," said Lakshmana, with martial arrogance. Rama argued with him further. "I'll change and alter fate itself, if necessary," repeated Lakshmana and concluded his sentence with the refrain, "Whoever dares to oppose my aim will be destroyed.

"I know no father and no mother, other than you," said Lakshmana, still unsoftened. "You are everything to me. And there is no meaning in my existence, and in the possession of my limbs and sense intact, unless I establish you on the throne as your right, irrespective of what a female serpent has tried to do. My blood boils and will not calm down----you will now see what my bow can do...."

At this Rama held his hand back. He said, "I am firmly convinced that our mother Kaikeyi is the one who deserves to inherit this kingdom, having saved our father's life and being assured of his gratitude; it is Bharata's privilege----being the one chosen by Kaikeyi; and my privilege is renunciation and association of enlightened hermits of the forest. Do you want to let your anger rage until you have vanquished an innocent brother who has no part is this, a mother who has nursed us, and a father who was the greatest ruler on earth? Is that victory worth all this? Is this anger, which seeks to destroy all firm relationships, worth nurturing? Control yourself, and take your hand off your bow."

Lakshmana relaxed, muttering, "What's all this strength of my arm worth! Mere burden, if it cannot be employed to destroy evil when I see it; and my anger itself has now proved futile."

Rama went up with Lakshmana to bid farewell to his stepmother Sumithra. As had happened with the others, Sumithra also bewailed Rama's exile and tried to stop him. Once untiringly, Rama expressed his determination to go and his joy at being able to fulfill his father's terms. While they were talking, a servant maid sent by Kaikeyi came bearing in her arms garments made of tree barks, a reminder for Rama to change quickly and depart. Lakshmana ordered another set for himself, shed the finery he was wearing, and changed into coarse bark. Presently Rama, dressed like an ASCETIC or penitent was ready to leave. At the sight of his departure, the women wept. Rama made one last attempt to leave Lakshmana behind but Lakshmana followed him stubbornly. He then went into Sita's chamber and found her already dressed in the rough tree fibre----her finery and jewels discarded and laid aside, although she had decorated and dressed herself as befitting a queen a little while ago. Rama, though he had been of so firm a mind for himself, felt disturbed at the sight of her----the change being so sudden. He said, "It was never my father's intention to send you along with me. This is not the life for you. I have only come to take your leave, not to take you with me...."

"I'm dressed and ready, as you see...."

"If it is your wish to discard fine clothes because I wear none, you may do so, though it's not necessary."

"I'm coming with you; my place is at your side wherever you may be...."

Rama saw the determination in her eyes and made one last plea. "You have your duties to perform here, my father and mother being here. I'll be with you again."

"After fourteen years! What would be the meaning of my existence? I could as well be dead. It will be living death for me without you. I am alive only when I am with you; a forest or a marble palace is all the same to me."

When he realized that she could

not be deflected from her purpose, Rama said, "If it is your wish, so let it be. May the gods protect you."

A large crowd had gathered outside the palace when Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita emerged in their austere garb, as decreed by Kaikeyi. Many wept at the sight of them, and cursed Kaikeyi again and again among themselves. A silence ensued as Vasishtha arrived with every sign of urgency. The crowd watched expectanly, a spurt of hope welling up in their hearts of a last-minute development which could transform the scene magically. For the first time people saw the sage Vasishtha looking forlorn and tired. Stepping up before Rama, he said, "Do not go. The King desires you to stay and come back to the palace."

"It is his desire I should be away...."

"Not his. He never said it, it is your stepmother's order. She has...."

Rama did not want him to continue his comment on Kaikeyi and interrupted. "Forgive me. It is my duty to obey her also, since she derives her authority from my father, and he has given her his word. How can it be different now?"

"Your father is deeply grieving that you are leaving him. He may not survive the separation, in his present state...."

Rama said, "You are our teacher in all matters. Please comfort my father, see that he realizes the nature of our present situation----of my duty as his son in keeping his word. A word given is like an arrow, it goes forward. You cannot recall it midway...." He made a deep bow to indicate that he had nothing more to say. Vasishtha turned back without a word, and withdrew, unwilling to be seen with tears in his eyes.

When Rama took a step, the whole crowd stepped forward, and it stopped when he stopped. No one spoke. Considering the vastness of the crowd, the silence was overwhelming. There were tears in several eyes. Rama told someone nearest him, "Now, I'll take leave of you all," and brought his palms together in a salutation. They returned the salutation, but moved when he moved, showing not the least sign of staying back. They surrounded Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana. The crowd was suffocating. After they had proceeded along for some distance, the crowd made way for a chariot which pulled up. Sumanthra got out of it and said, "Get into the chariot. Sita Devi may not be able to walk through this crowd...."

Rama smiled to himself. "She has undertaken to keep me company and may have to go a long way on foot yet."

"Still, when a chariot is available, please come. At least you can leave the crowd behind and get ahead...."

Rama helped Sita up into the chariot. The horses started to gallop, but not too far----to no purpose actually, as the crowd made it difficult for the vehicle to proceed except at a walking pace. Rama said, "Let us go slowly; no harm." Lakshmana added, "Our stepmother has at least refrained from specifying how fast you should get away!"

They reached the banks of the river Sarayu and camped there for the night. The citizens who had followed also spread themselves out on the sand, not in the least minding the discomfort. Past midnight, fatigued by the trekking, the whole gathering had gone off to sleep. Rama said softly to Sumanthra, "This is the time to leave. You may go back to the palace and tell my father that I am safe." While the followers slept, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana rode out to a farther point on the river, crossed it, and went up the embankment. Sumanthra watched them go and then turned back, following Rama's suggestion that he should reach the capital by another route without waking the crowd.

Dasaratha lay inert, motionless, with his eyes closed----except when a footstep sounded outside, at which time his lips moved as he whispered, "Has Rama come?" When Vasishtha or Kausalya gave some soothing answer, he lapsed into his drowsy state again. "Who is gone to fetch him?"

"Sumanthra," Vasishtha replied. Finally a footstep did sound, loudly enough to rouse the drowsy King. The door opened, and the King also opened his eyes and exclaimed, "Ah, Sumanthra? Where is Rama?" Before Vasishtha or Kausalya could prevent his reply, Sumanthra explained, "Rama, Sita and Lakshmana crossed the river, went up the bank, and then along a foot track that wound its way through a cluster of bamboos...."

"Oh!" groaned the King. "How, how...When?" He could not complete the sentence. Sumanthra tried to say, "Rama wanted to escape the crowd...."

The thought of Rama and Sita on the rough forest track beyond bamboo clusters was too unbearable for Dasaratha. He fell into a swoon and never recovered from the shock. ("He died even as Sumanthra was speaking," says the poet.)

The King's death left the country without a ruler for the time being. Vasishtha convened an urgent council of the ministers and officials of the court and decided, "The first thing to do is to preserve the King's body until Bharata can come back and perform the funeral." They kept the body embalmed in a cauldron of oil.

Two messengers were dispatched with a sealed packet for Bharata, advising him to return to the capital urgently. The messengers were to keep their horses continously at a gallop, and were not to explain anything or convey any information. They were trusted men, experienced in the task of carrying royal dispatches, and could be depended upon not to exceed their orders. Within eight days, they drew up at the portals of Aswapathi's palace at Kekaya and declared, "We carry an important message for Bharata."

Bharata was overjoyed, and ordered, "Bring them up with the least delay." He received them in his chamber and asked at once, "Is my father happy and in good health?" The messengers murmured a polite answer, and Bharata, "How is my brother, Rama?" And they repeated their polite murmuring again, and said, "We bear an epistle for Your Highness." Bharata received the sealed message (written on palm leaf and wrapped in silk), opened it, and read: "Your return to Ayodhya is urgently required in connection with state affairs." He ordered that the message bearers be rewarded liberally and began immediate preparations for his return to Ayodhya, without having the patience even to consult the palace astrologer as to the propitious time for starting on a long journey.

When they reached the outskirts of Ayodhya, Bharata asked his brother Sathrugna, "Do you notice any change in the atmosphere?"

"No traffic of chariots or horse-riders, no spectacle of people moving about in public squares and highways..."

"Streets and homes without any illumination."

"No sound of music----no happy voices or songs or instruments.... What oppressive silence! So few to be seen in the streets, and even the one or two we meet look up with such unsmiling faces! What is wrong with them?"

Bharata drove straight to Dasaratha's palace, went up, and burst into his chamber with words of greeting on his lips. Not finding the King in his usual place, he paused, wondering where he should seek him. Just then an inner door opened, a maid appeared and said, "Your mother summons you." Immediately he left for Kaikeyi's apartment. He made a deep obeisance to her, touched her feet, and Kaikeyi asked, "Are my father, brothers, and the others safe and happy in Kekaya?"

Bharata replied that all was well in her father's home. He then asked, "I want to touch the lotus feet of my father. Where is he gone? Where can I seek him?"

"The great King has been received by resplendent heavenly beings in the next world. He is happy and at peace. Do not grieve," replied Kaikeyi calmly.

When he took in the full import of her news and found his tongue again, Bharata said, "None but you could have uttered these terrible words in this manner. Is your heart made of stone? I should never have left his side. My misfortune, my mistake. The world has not seen a greater ruler; no son has had a nobler father. I was not fated to be with him, to hear his voice, to feel his glorious presence----enjoying my holiday indeed! What a time to have chosen for relaxation!" He recounted again and again his father's exploits as a warrior, and this in some measure mitigated his anguish. After a long brooding silence he said, "Until I see Rama and listen to his voice, my grief will not abate."

At this point, Kaikeyi said in

a matter-of-fact voice, "With his wife and brother, he left to live in the forests."

"What a time to have chosen for forest-going! When will he be back? What made him go? Did he go there before the King's death or after? Has he committed a wrong? What could be the cause of his exile, if it is an exile? Did the gods decree it or the King? Did he go before or after the King's death? Oh, impossible thought----did he commit a wrong? But if Rama committed a seemingly wrong act, it would still be something to benefit humanity, like a mother forcibly administering a medicine to her child."

"It's none of what you think. He went away with the full knowledge of your father."

"My father dies, my brother is exiled.... What has happened? What is all this mystery? What is behind all this?"

"Now attend to what I am going to say, calmly and with good sense. Of course, it would have been splendid if your father had lived. But it was not in our hands. You will have to accept things as they come and not let your feelings overpower and weaken your mind. Through your father's irrevocable promise to grant me two wishes, you are today lord of this earth, and Rama has willingly removed himself from your path. After he gave me his promise, your father became rather weak in mind...."

Bharata understood now. He ground his teeth, glared at her and thundered, "You are a serpent. You are heartless. You have had the cunning, the deviousness, to trap the King into a promise, and not cared that it meant death to him. How am I to prove to the world that I have no hand in this? How can anyone help thinking that I have manoeuvered it all through? ...You have earned me the blackest reputation for anyone since the beginning of our solar race."

He concluded with regret, "You deserve to die for your perfidy. ...If I do not snuff your wretched life out with my own hand, do not pride yourself that it is because you are my mother, but you are spared because Rama would despise me for my deed."

He left her without another word and went off sobbing to the palace of Kausalya, Rama's mother. She received him with all courtesy and affection, although she could not be quite clear in her mind about Bharata's innocence. Bharata threw himself befoe her and lamented, "In which world shall I seek my father? Where can I see my brother again? Have the fates kept me away in my grandfather's house so that I may suffer this pang?"

After he had gone on thus for some time expressing his sorrow and his determination to destroy himself rather than bear the burden of both separation and ill-repute, Kausalya realized that Bharata was innocent. She asked at the end of his speech, "So you were unaware of the evil designs of your mother?"

At this Bharata was so incensed that he burst into self-damnation: "If I had the slightest knowledge of what my mother was planning, may I be condemned to dwell in the darkest hell reserved for...." And he listed a series of the blackest sins for which people were committed to hell.

Vasishtha arrived. Bharata asked, "Where is my father?" He was taken to where the King's body was kept.

Vasishtha said, "It is time to go through the funeral rites." When Bharata was ready for the ceremonies, Dasaratha's body was carried in a procession on elephant back to the accompaniment of mournful drums and trumpets, to the bank of the Sarayu River, where a funeral pyre had been erected. Dasaratha's body was laid on it with elaborate prayers and rituals. When the time came to light the pyre, Bharata approached it with a flame in his hand; suddenly, at the last

moment, Vasishtha stopped him, remembering Dasaratha's last injunction disowning Kaikeyi and her son. He explained it delicately and with profound sorrow: "The most painful duty that the gods have left me to perform."

Bharata understood. He withdrew, leaving his brother Sathrugna to continue the performance, with the bitter reflection, "This again my mother's gift to me, not even to be able to touch my fathers's funeral pyre!"

At the end of the day, Bharata retired to his palace and shut himself in. After five days of mourning, the ministers and Vasishtha conferred, approached Bharata, and requested him to become their King, as the country needed a ruler. Bharata refused the suggestion and announced, "I am determined to seek Rama and beg him to return." He ordered that all citizens and the army should be ready to accompany him to the forest. A vast throng of citizens, army, horses, elephants, women, and children, set forth in the direction of Chitrakuta, where Rama was camping. Bharata wore a garment made of tree bark, and insisted on accomplishing the journey on foot as a penance, following Rama's own example. When they crossed the Ganges and came within sight of Chitrakuta, Lakshmana, who had set himself as Rama's bodyguard, noticed the crowd at a distance and cried out, "There he comes, with an army----to make sure that you don't return to claim his ill-gotten kingdom. I'll destroy the whole lot. I have enough power in my quiver."

While they stood watching, Bharata left his followers behind and came forward alone in his tree-bark garb, his arms held aloft in supplication, with tears in his eyes, praying, "Rama, Rama, forgive me." Rama whispered to Lakshmana, "Do you note his martial air, and the battle-dress he has put on?"

Lakshmana hung his head and confessed, "I had misjudged him."

Bharata flung himself down at Rama's feet. Rama lifted him up with many kind words.

When Rama learned of his father's death, he broke down. After a while, when he recovered, he set about performing on the river bank the rites required of the son of the departed King. When they settled down after the ceremonies, Bharata opened the subject. "I have come with all these people to beg you to return home and be our King."

Rama shook his head and said, "Yes, fourteen years hence. That was our father's wish. You are the King by his authority."

"If you think I should be the King, so be it, but I abdicate this instant, and crown you."

The argument went on at a highly academic and philosophical level, the entire assembly watched with respect.

In a world where we are accustomed to rivalries over possession, authority, and borders, and people clashing over the issue, "Ours," or "Mine, not yours," it is rather strange to find two people debating whose the kingdom is NOT, and asserting: "Yours, not mine."

"So be it; if I have the authority----then I confer it on you as the ruler," said Bharata at one stage. "On my command as the ruler, if you desire to think so, you shall be the King." It went on thus. Rama went on repeating that there could be no word higher than that of a father; no conduct other than obedience to it. Throughout he referred to Kaikeyi in the gentlest terms and always as "mother." Vasishtha, watching the debate, burst out: "I have been your GURU; there can be no higher authority than a guru----you must return to Ayodhya as King." Rama said, "It's not right to give me that command. My parents, who have given me my body and mind, are higher than a guru."

Bharata declared, "This is my vow. I don't care what happens. I

shall renounce everything and live in the forest with Rama for fourteen years."

The gods watched this argument, afraid that if Rama returned to the kingdom, overwhelmed by the needs of the country, the purpose of his incarnation would be defeated [to defeat RAVANA, the ten-headed demon King of Lanka] and proclaimed: "Bharata, go back and rule on Rama's behalf for fourteen years."

There was nothing more to it. Bharata said, "I have nothing more to say. I shall rule for fourteen years. But not a day longer. If you, Rama, do not appear at the end of fourteen years, I shall immolate myself. Give me your sandals, please. They will be your symbol, and I shall rule on behalf of that symbol. I will not re-enter Ayodhya until y ou come back, but stay outside the city."

Bearing Rama's sandals in his hands, with all reverence, Bharata turned back. He established himself in a little village called, Nandigram, on the outskirts of Ayodhya, installed Rama's sandals on the throne, and ruled the country as a regent.

DISCUSSION AFTER THE STORY-TELLING HAS CONCLUDED

The following questions will lead the students to synthesize the information they have read and heard. The process will allow the students to arrive at an understanding of dharama.

[Recommend projecting the chart "RAMAYANA GENEALOGY" or writing it on the blackboard to allow the students to follow the questioning.]

1. WHAT WAS DASHARATHA'S DHARMA?

   Possible answer should include:

   a. To be truthful,
   b. To be honest.
   c. To keep his word.
   d. To make decisions for the best interests of his people.
   e. To defend those who cannot defend themselves.

2. WHAT TEMPTATIONS WERE PLACED IN DASHARATHA's PATH THAT DETRACTED HIM FROM ACHIEVING DHARMA?

   Possible answer should include:

   a. Decision to make Rama king.
   b. Dishonesty of why he wanted Rama's coronation to take place immediately.
   c. Renouncing his marriage to Kaikeyi and disowning Bharata.

3. DID DASHARATHA ACHIEVE HIS DHARMA? HOW?

   Possible answer should include:

   a. Gave respect to all three of his wives.
   b. Dasharatha wanted to protect his sons from harm and encouraged their education.
   c. He willingly offered assistance to Viswamithra.
   d. The king felt that Rama would be best for the people.
   e. Kaikeyi forced the king to keep his word and make Bharata king.

4. WHAT IS RAMA'S DHARMA?

   Possible answer should include:

   a. To achieve human and spiritual perfection.
   b. Honored and obeyed his parents and teachers.
   c. Lived a just and honest life in his dealings with ALL people.
   d. Rama knew and understood his duties as son, prince, brother, and husband.

5. WHAT TESTS DID RAMA HAVE TO FACE?

Possible answers should include:

a. The experience at Vismaithra's aswrama.
b. The stringing of Shiva's bow at the wedding.
c. Obedience of Dasharatha's wish to be king.
d. The obedience of Kaikeyi's wish that he go into exile.
e. Temptation of using his popularity with the people to gain the throne.

6. DOES IT APPEAR THAT RAMA WILL ACHIEVE DHARMA? (YES)

Possible answers should include:

[Use question #5 to defend position.]

7. WHAT IS KAIKEYI'S DHARMA?

Possible answers should include:

a. To serve her husband.
b. To help her husband achieve dharma.
c. To be a good mother to all her sons.

8. DOES IT APPEAR AS IF KAIKEYI WILL ACHIEVE DHARMA?

a. Possible answers should include:

a. Yes, to have her husband achieve his dharma she must make him keep his word given to Aswapathi.

b. No, she uses methods that are adharmic (goes against her dharma) to force the king to keep his word.
c. Kaikeyi is trapped by the sin of self-importance (ego)
d. As a queen she loses sight of what is best for all the people.
e. As a mother she stops identifying herself as mother to all the king's sons.
F. Kaikeyi begins to identify herself as mother only to her natural son, Bharata.

9. WHAT IS KAUSHALYA'S DHARMA?

[Same as Kaikeyi's dharma in question #7]

10. DOES IT APPEAR AS IF KAUSHALYA WILL ACHIEVE DHARMA?

Possible answer should include:

a. Yes, Volunteers to be with her son in exile.
b. Obeys the wishes of her son to remain in Ayodha and take care of the king.

c. Does not undermine the authority of the king or Queen Kaikeyi.
d. She encourages what is best for all the people.
e. Recognizes that the honor of the king must be maintained.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ABOUT DHARMA....

".... Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test:

Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to control over his own life and destiny?"

TALISMAN
Mahatma Gandhi

AN ANALOGY....

Read the first part to students and ask them to respond. After a few minutes of discussion read the second part. Ask the students if they agree. After a short evaluation go to question #11.

FIRST PART

Dharma is like a many faceted precious jewel. Each facet adds beauty and dimension to the gem. To mar or destroy even one facet renders the stone worthless. The skilled cutter creates and polishes the facets into a valuable gem.

SECOND PART

So it is with a human being. To live a good life and to neglect even the smallest aspect will damage the total person. However, if the individual strives to work toward perfection, as was the case of Rama, they will be as priceless as the valuable jewel.

11. WHAT IS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF DHARMA?

Answers will vary----points to stress:

a. Dharma is more than obedience to parents or teachers or simple duty.
b. Dharma is to extend one's abilities and talents to the highest degree. (Goal setting and achieving ---- duty to one's self.)
c. Dharma is consideration of others and personal conduct.
d. Dharma is respecting nature and the universe.
e. Dharma is following the positive values of a society that embraces moral laws of man.

* Review the definition of dharma on page iv.